

Day Zero

*Photographs at the Epicenter of History*¹

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Introduction

If the World Trade Center attacks occupied not only Ground Zero, but Day Zero, on which America's new relationship to the world began and after which nothing would be the same, this day becomes fixed as an historical moment around which there can be no ambiguity. With this belief comes such a strong determination to respond and push forward into the future that everything before that September day ceases to exist and looking back is seemingly not required. At the same time, however, the event is firmly fixed within nostalgic frames that, both rhetorically and visually, claim to make sense of the new reality. Photography has played a central role in this process. As a medium uniquely disposed to both presumed objectivity and spectacle, as well as to the act of framing itself, photography is, in this context, a site of tension between the denial of history and its fetishization.

In his last major work, written in the midst of the Second World War shortly before he committed suicide, Walter Benjamin recognized the importance of looking backward, but in doing so he did not see a narrative that could help him make any sense of the present. Instead, he presents a picture of the "angel of history": a metaphorical figure (inspired by a painting by Paul Klee) who stands with his back to the future, arrested by a vision of the past which is laid out before him. Rather than a sequential chain of events, what the angel sees is history as perpetual accumulation: "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."² For Benjamin, this kind of historical consciousness is our best hope for understanding the present, even if it leaves us helpless to intervene. The angel surveys the great crime scene of history, in an image that could not be more loaded with pathos:

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The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.³

Crime scenes are sacred places. As Peter Wollen writes, “anybody who watches Court TV knows that crime scenes should never be disturbed. They should never be contaminated. They should never be entered by unauthorized people. Nothing should ever be moved until it has been photographed.... In fact, it should be treated exactly as if it were sacred. In this context the photographer’s camera is not simply a recording device, but an officiant’s ceremonial object, and the photograph itself can be regarded as a kind of icon or relic.”⁴ Perhaps this offers some indication as to why the cultural response to September 11 has allowed for an abundance of photography, which seems to record without touching, but has largely banished critical reflection, which might tamper, interfere, disturb. Sacred spaces are exempt from theory, especially theory borne out of a tradition as disruptive as “deconstruction.” It is the job of the forensic photographer to arrive at the scene of suffering, violence, pain, death and fear, and to “pump the aura out.” Why? So that even though the victim cannot be brought back to life, something useful can still be learned. Like the angel, the forensic photographer’s task is not to interfere with the wreckage, but to bear witness to it.⁵

Nowhere in history has the sacredness of a crime scene been more vigorously upheld than Ground Zero. The National September 11 Memorial Museum, located on the site since 2011 as the focal point of collective remembrance, declares that its purpose is to “respect this place made sacred through tragic loss.”⁶ And no photographer has been more firmly identified with the role of ceremonial officiant than Joel Meyerowitz. (Photography critic David Company goes further, calling him an “undertaker.”⁷) Meyerowitz’s work also shows, though, how great an interpretive leap there can be from the forensic to the ceremonial.

Almost immediately after the collapse of the towers the area was fenced off, classified as a crime scene and closed to all photographers, until, with sponsorship from the Museum of the State of New York, Meyerowitz succeeded in gaining access on September 13. Already an award-winning photographer with a record of solo exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Boston Museum of Fine Art, and others outside the U.S., Meyerowitz has been most celebrated as a photographer of street life and landscapes, and for his early pioneering use of color in both genres. But it is his Ground Zero work that has made him famous outside of the specialist

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realm of Euro-American photographic art history and brought him to the attention of a popular international audience.

Four masked men in hard hats stoop in the rubble of the Pit, one holding a lamp to better see into the gaps between twisted pieces of metal and concrete. One of them (possibly two) has “Police” marked across his back. The caption of the photograph in Meyerowitz’s 2006 photo book *Aftermath: World Trade Centre Archive*, reads “Searchers in Rubble,” and the date only “2001”—no month, so we can’t tell much about what stage of the process the image records—how soon after the crime, what these searchers have already uncovered, how wearied they are at this point by the tension of looking and the horror of finding. They are in the extreme foreground, so close to us that two of their bodies are bisected by the frame. But they are not its focus. So small are they in comparison to the rising majesty of the ruins that surround them, in scale so much more like the bits of building on the ground, that they are just part of the texture of the periphery, and the eye finds them only after the picture has already made its impact. Wreckage piled upon wreckage and hurled at their feet, the searchers keep their gaze close to the ground and are unmoved by the spectacle that we see behind them. They are tending to the victims as best they can, leaving us free to look on in awe at the play of light on the latticework of the remaining façades and the impossible grandeur of this edifice that looks more like a cathedral than when the towers were standing in its place. Within this hallowed perimeter of Ground Zero Meyerowitz made a set of photographs of which Walter Benjamin would not have approved. Rather than being stripped away, aura is ramped up to an epic level, suggesting not a single, emptied instant of frozen reality or a momentary flash of experience but the whole arc of history, stable and continuous.

As an accomplished landscape photographer, Meyerowitz succeeds in making the collapsed twin towers appear as Ancient ruins, monumental in scale and significance. Of course, they also claim monumental characteristics in a different sense: the publisher’s website describes the work as, “an elegy to the thousands who lost their lives.” These are photographic monuments as well as monumental photographs. And in addition to the epic depiction of space, Meyerowitz’s characteristic large-format landscape style also has a bearing on the images’ rendering of time, which is well suited to their ideological inference. In a critical indictment of the work, which has no qualms about naming it as propaganda, Liam Kennedy has argued that the “gravitas” of these photographs is achieved in part because Meyerowitz captures “extended moments rather than decisive moments,” inviting empathetic contemplation as the only possible response.⁸ This is not the

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frozen snapshot style that by necessity characterizes so many other photographs of the frenetic unfolding of September 11, but a controlled, stable depiction of the sustained passage of time in a single frame. There is no chaos here; no fragmentation or elusiveness of meaning. Meaning presents itself as steady, self-evident and easily grasped.

Though framed as the only documentary record of the cleanup operation, these photographs have less in common with the American documentary tradition than they do with history painting or the work of the Romantics, and specifically in several cases, scenes of the sublime drama of the sea. A picture captioned “Welders in South Tower” is a wide-angle nocturnal scene showing a small group of metalworkers amongst the very last standing remnants of one of the buildings. Rising above the horizon of the pit’s boundary, the surrounding buildings are cast in deep black-blues and greens, against which the welders’ fire is tiny but brilliant. In many of the pictures, Meyerowitz makes atmospheric use of rising smoke, steam, or spray from fire-hoses. In this image, steam or smoke—it could be either—catches the light and picks out architectural details, both highlighting and obscuring them like a watercolor wash, or sea-spray. It creates a plane of its own amongst the other receding layers in the photograph, all of which are in perfect focus and redolent with textural detail. The human figures are somewhere in the middle distance, both dwarfed and anchored by the hot halo of their work, which seems to keep them from drowning in the expanse of twisted rubble that encroaches in dark waves. This photograph more than any of the others evokes the sea-storms and shipwrecks of J.M.W. Turner, in which man struggles in noble contention with the sublime power of the elements.

It makes sense that these photographs should find their historical reference point not in the fleeting here-and-now of conventional photojournalism but the paintings of Turner and the Romantics: an art of transcendence, mythic hubris and eternal truths. Meyerowitz says that his goal “was not to make ‘pretty’ pictures of the destruction but to record—with meticulous archival precision—what happened ... it was not about making Art,” though he does admit that many of the images “revealed an accidental beauty.”⁹ Some have dared to describe the act of terrorism at the World Trade Center as “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos” (Karlheinz Stockhausen), and the perpetrators as “brilliant” (Norman Mailer) “death artists” (Jonathan Franzen).¹⁰ But after the spectacle of the attack had passed, the site was not beautiful; it was a mass graveyard. As one might expect, many images of the Ground Zero aftermath made by professional photographers like Gilles Peress and Susan Meiselas, as well as

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Joel Meyerowitz himself, are well-composed to the point of being formally beautiful, though it has seemed sacrilegious to say so (and so they were called surreal). The photographic artistry that can transform the horrific and the un-seeable in these scenes is part of the commercial appeal of commemorative publications like *Aftermath*, but it is also politically and ideologically expedient.

Identifying Meyerowitz's work as an archetype of what he calls "late photography," David Campany has argued that such images, which draw on the visual language of the sublime and therefore a sense of timelessness, have the potential to be vehicles for mass mourning, but they can also foster "political withdrawal" precisely because of their profound stillness and silence. The dangerous truism that such imagery speaks for itself can, he says, "easily flatter the ideological paralysis of those who gaze at it with a lack of social or political will to make sense of its circumstance."¹¹ Meyerowitz's photographs were part of a state apparatus that capitalized on this ideological paralysis, and that had the power not only to cement whatever meanings it chose to invest in them, but to underwrite the authority of these meanings and promote them around the world.

In February 2004, twenty-two sets of Joel Meyerowitz's Ground Zero photographs began a tour of 135 venues in 64 countries, in the form of a travelling exhibition staged by the U.S. Department of State and Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The images in the exhibition, titled *After September 11: Images from Ground Zero*, were selected to show "the true human and physical dimensions" of the attacks' aftermath to a global audience (including that of the Afghanistan National Art Gallery in Kabul), and were intended to reveal to viewers around the world the unmediated reality of what America had suffered. Alongside reproductions of Meyerowitz's photographs, the accompanying catalogue publication features many images of visitors, including some who had participated in the New York cleanup operation itself, looking at the exhibition at its various locations, contemplating the pictures alone or in groups, in a manner that can be read as a kind of directive in how to see and how to respond.¹² At its launch event, the then Secretary of State, Colin Powell, made a speech that betrayed a startling interpretive leap from the grief invoked by these photographs, to military retaliation:

September eleventh was a very personal experience for each of us. Each of us remembers where we were when we first learned of the attacks. Each of us remembers our initial chilling impressions and our response. These images remind me that our country, our people and our families are very precious and that we must do all we can to protect them from the scourge of terrorism.... It gave us a sense of purpose and vision as a

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people, showed the world what Americans were made of, and *gave us the opportunity* to lead a worldwide coalition to go after not only the perpetrators of these attacks, but to go after terrorists around the world¹³ [italics added].

The danger of this uncritical connection between the emotive and the militant is seemingly made uniquely possible by photography (the word “opportunity” is surely the most troubling in Powell’s whole speech). There is a warning here about the way in which photography’s apparent self-evidence—the transparent authority that it claims, and its easy isolation from the flows of political power—is at the outset in danger of shutting off the kinds of conversation that need to be had about it. In his address at the National Cathedral on September 15, 2001, President George W. Bush made a similar link, telling the congregation, “our unity is a kinship of grief, and a steadfast resolve to prevail against our enemies. And this unity against terror is now extending across the world.”¹⁴ Again, the association between grief and militarism was a foregone conclusion. Like the photographs, it spoke for itself.

Meyerowitz introduces *Aftermath*, his own monograph publication showcasing the Ground Zero project, released by Phaidon in 2006, by saying, “I saw what I needed to do. To me, no photographs meant no history. I decided at that moment that I would find my way in and make an archive for the City of New York.”¹⁵ Clearly understanding his task in terms of national record and commemoration, he describes himself as being influenced by the state-commissioned documentary photographers of the Farm Security Administration in the 1920s, which was both nationally significant, and “socially useful.”¹⁶ True to this intention, his huge archive of Ground Zero images is now a freely accessible digital resource held at the Museum of the City of New York. In a second, more telling, historical comparison, he also likens himself to Mathew Brady, also a celebrated photographer of his day who, with the express blessing of the Lincoln administration, had famously gained access to photograph the Union encampments and battlefields of the American Civil War. This comparison is, for Meyerowitz, seemingly based upon a notion of the photographer’s responsibility to record catastrophic national events, and to both shape and safeguard “public memory.”¹⁷ At the time of the September 11 attacks, several journalists had drawn comparisons between the devastation at Ground Zero and that experienced during the American Civil War, noting the number of casualties relative to that of the 1862 battle of Antietam.¹⁸

In 1985, Alan Trachtenberg called the American Civil War “the first significant crisis in modern history to occur within the memorializing gaze of a camera,” writing that it represented, specifically in Brady’s work, the first

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case of widely accepted “historicism-by-photography, [the] notion that historical knowledge declares its true value by its photographability.”¹⁹ This he also defines as the “historicizing ideology” of photography. It could be said, borrowing Trachtenberg’s words, that the September 11 attacks were the first significant crisis in modern history to occur *for* the memorializing gaze of the camera, and that its inherent and intentional photographability gave it more power than would otherwise have been imaginable. Along with many others who photographed the event and its aftermath, Meyerowitz articulates a belief in the “historicizing-by-photography” that Trachtenberg attributes to photographers and audiences of the nineteenth century, showing that this acceptance of photography’s role in the shaping of public memory has almost as long a history as photography itself. His efforts to win access and his subsequent toiling for nine months to create an archive that he saw as his national duty situate Meyerowitz, like Brady before him, within what might be called an American tradition of the national hero photographer. Journalism has long required the creation of star witnesses; brave, skilled and privileged in their access to conflict and catastrophe, whether promoted by the patronage of figures in authority, or (even better) working alone as unilateral renegades in pursuit of the truth. With comparable status to those engaged in combat or rescue operations, but on a uniquely reified level, these photographers are immersed in the action, and yet transcend it: as specialized witnesses they are endowed not only with bravery but with the prestigious autonomy of the artist. Meyerowitz says of his project,

it is a privilege to work at Ground Zero. Everyone who works there has been transformed by the spirituality of the place. The camaraderie among the workers in the zone reminds me of the stories we’ve heard about the World Wars, where men and women are thrown together by a common cause, share tragedies and victories, and are forever bound to one another by their effort.²⁰

Taking pictures is equated naturally with helping in the rescue effort. A publicity portrait taken by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders during the project shows Meyerowitz in the midst of “the zone,” looking intently at the viewer, holding his huge mahogany box camera and folded tripod casually over his shoulder in the same manner as a cleanup worker might sling his shovel on a break from digging—or a soldier his rifle. Here the photographer claims this same mantle of military heroism for himself, elevating it even further by virtue of his artistic gift, his sophisticated photographic paraphernalia and his patriotic rhetoric.

Military heroism, and—even more frequent than references to the American Civil War—the comparison with U.S. involvement in the Second World War, became a standard framing reference point through which

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to valorize not just the military action that followed the attacks, but the very work of cleaning up the rubble. This is illustrated by another photographic example: the ready comparison between Thomas Franklin's photograph of firefighters raising a U.S. flag at Ground Zero with photojournalist Joe Rosenthal's famous World War II icon "Flag Raising at Iwo Jima." The striking but unintentional formal reference made by Franklin was widely picked up by the media, and made it easy to slot his image into the historical framework of military victory, national glory, and righteous struggle.²¹

Another widely circulated photograph taken at Ground Zero makes similar associations in a subtler but much more calculated way: A picture by White House photographer Eric Draper shows President George W. Bush atop the "pile," shoulder to shoulder with a retired fire fighter by the name of Bob Beckwith. The President stands as the uppermost figure in the scene and is the focus of the crowd, whom he addresses through a loud haler. But his body language self-consciously shifts attention on to Beckwith, who by contrast stands, feet planted wide apart, hands on hips and gaze aloft, as the real hero of the moment. This status is reinforced by his age (seventy-nine) and also by the gas-mask-like apparatus worn around his neck, both of which implicitly identify him with the "greatest generation" of American World War II veterans. Rather than a uniform, however, Beckwith is dressed in the scruffy jeans and sweatshirt of the American everyman, and so, on top of this association of wartime glory, he is also an archetype of the civilian heroism that has already come to characterize this more recent episode in New York's history. Bush picks out this American hero, elevates him for all to see, and then stands reflected in his symbolic credentials, identifying himself as the champion of all that Beckwith represents. But in case the symbol of a hero who is part civilian and part officer is too ambiguous (Beckwith is not just a fire fighter, he is a "veteran" fire fighter), the group is flanked in the foreground by a uniformed FDNY official on the left and a police officer on the right, both mirroring one another's solemn pose and facial expression and adding further emphasis to the gravitas of the moment.

Mark McKinnon, George W. Bush's media advisor, somewhat optimistically describes this picture as "the most lasting and iconic image of [his] presidency. It is much like President Reagan's call in Berlin to 'tear down this wall,' except this moment was unscripted and an antecedent to war, which makes it even more powerful."²² Other political and media figures disagree on the point of the image's spontaneity, but not on its value to the president's PR. The photo-opportunity was not only perfectly realized, but essential, says Luc Sante, cultural critic and historian of

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photography: "People wanted to see him climbing on top of something [down there].... Even if the calculation was done five minutes ahead of time, it was calculated. I'm positive of it. [It was] part of an image-management strategy that's characterized this administration from the beginning."²³

By contrast with Meyerowitz's stable, eulogistic and timeless presentation of the attacks' aftermath, the succession of moments that actually unfolded on September 11 was compressed and disordered, as the combination of "real-time" broadcasting, an overload of imagery, and the frequent uncoupling of that imagery from words created a type of international media event that had never been encountered before. Jürgen Habermas has called September 11 the "first historic world event," meaning that it was visible, unedited and live, to a world audience as it was happening, making the international public a "universal eyewitness."²⁴ For him, the unprecedented singularity of September 11 lay in the unedited "real-ness" of its media portrayal. According to David Hazinski, head of a broadcast news initiative at the University of Georgia's telecommunications department, more than two billion people watched the attack happen in real time or very soon after.²⁵ Robert Pledge, head of the Contact Press Images photo agency, notes that this was due largely to the time of day at which it took place: "During all major events in the recent past, Tiananmen Square, the Gulf war, the Iraq invasion—there's always a part of the world that's in the dark. But this could be seen at once, anywhere, in both hemispheres, any latitude, any culture, throughout the world, live—something that we've never had happen before."²⁶ Though the presentation of this event was, as I have argued elsewhere, subsequently very carefully managed, it was explosively different from any other in its immediate initial worldwide dissemination, and it was on this level essentially unmanageable not only for the press but for the psyche, largely due to the fact that the overwhelming stream of images appeared before any kind of clear verbal or textual explanation was established that could make sense of what was being seen.²⁷ In this sense, the event signaled a new paradigm of perception, even introduced new kinds of traumatic encounter that have not existed before, and which challenge the basis of trauma theory as it has existed up to this point.²⁸ In such a context, images are so potent that they can be blinding. They are also wide open to manipulation, precisely because of their capacity to evade language.

In his book, *Open Sky*, Paul Virilio uses the terms "underexposure" and "overexposure" to set out a radical new understanding of time in the age of "real-time" continuous tele-presence and virtuality.²⁹ Rather than unfolding in the form of conventional narrative succession (before, during, after), media audiences are increasingly accustomed, he says, to perceiving

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time in terms of abrupt and discontinuous irruptions of varying intensities. These irruptions of what he calls “chronoscopic time” are characterized as underexposure, exposure, and overexposure. Chronoscopic time is essentially a violent process of intense compression by which narrative time implodes and all that is left is an obsessive fixation with the real-time instant: the exposure. By this definition of exposure, Virilio’s concern is not the exposure of viewing subjects, as one might describe exposure to UV rays for example, but the exposure of *things to audiences*: how the visible and represented world—including time itself—are presented to our vision and experience. This is not a psychological or a psychoanalytic model, but I would like to employ it in the service of one.

Virilio’s discussion of space and time begins in the mysterious, almost transcendental territory of astrophysics, from which he gleans that time is “no longer exclusively the time of classic chronological succession, but now a time of (chronoscopic) exposure of the duration of events at the speed of light.”³⁰ Developing the theme of light as understood within the realms of astrophysics and quantum theory, he then links the “exposure” of chronoscopic time to the mechanics of the photographic process. Recognizing the capacity of the camera to interfere with conventional time by freezing and isolating instants from the flow of temporal experience, he notes that in the making of a photograph, time is “no longer the same as time passing, but essentially a kind of time that gets exposed, that ‘breaks the surface’—surfaces; and this exposure time then succeeds the classic time of succession. The time of the sudden *take* is accordingly, from the beginning, time-light.”³¹ He goes on, “this is confirmed by the various technological experiments with ‘exposure time,’ from Niépce and Daguerre’s dark room through Marey’s chronophotography to the present-day elementary particle accelerators which are veritable telescopes of the infinitely small.”³² He seems to mean all of this as an elaborate metaphor—a useful way of illustrating an abstract point—but surely it is more than that. The photographic process is not just a useful metaphoric device, it is the very location and instance of what he is talking about, especially in psychological terms. Time erupts: time, light, the object and the image are all, simultaneously in the photographic instant, exposed, and this must translate in the experience of looking at the resulting photograph, whether minutes or years later, as another layer of exposure: what he himself calls the “relativistic eternal present ... when the successive moments of time are equally present in a single perception that makes them a landscape of events.”³³

We might connect this phenomenon—this disorder of synchronicity; the exposure of compressed, chronoscopic time that left

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onlookers transfixed and helpless—with the simultaneous, cumulative piling of wreckage witnessed by Benjamin's angel of history. Psychologist Judith Lewis Herman offers a further, resonant metaphor, writing of the "pile of snapshots" that typically constitutes traumatic memory. In a clinical application of Freudian (and also Lacanian) theory, language is key to Herman's prescription for recovery from trauma for both individuals and groups. Specifically, the form of language that she calls for is narrative retelling. Traumatic memories are chaotic and without order: they are "pre-narrative."³⁴ Arriving at a point of being able to tell the story of a traumatic experience out loud or in writing, and subsequently as part of the internal storytelling by which one's subjectivity is constructed, represents a conquering of the unspeakable. Beginning with the fragmented raw material of sensation and images—which, depending on the context may be concrete objects or reside solely in the mind—the goal is to create a verbal account:

Given the "iconic" visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to these "indelible images." ... The ultimate goal, however, is to put the story, including its imagery, into words. ... The therapist must help the patient move back and forth in time, from her protected anchorage in the present to immersion in the past, so that she can simultaneously re-experience the feelings in all their intensity while holding on to [a] sense of safe connection.³⁵

The pile of snapshots, in other words, can play a role in recovery, but only if the subject is able to sort through them, overcoming the cumulative, over-exposed entropy of time and space and committing them to some kind of sequence.³⁶ The wreckage of history over which the angel of history is doomed to preside, must be sorted through. Benjamin's vision, however, is intended as a direct critique of Marxist historical materialism: a resistance against the idea that the past can be viewed as a continuum of progress; a sequence of intelligible events that are available to be "read," and which will culminate in a revolutionary future. Instead, Benjamin is arguing for a looking back that understands history as, above all else, an encounter. For him, "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."³⁷ While it might be psychologically therapeutic on an individual level, to suggest that history can be perceived or interpreted as a stable narrative is ideological fallacy. But this does not mean that it must not be faced in all its horror, or that it cannot be learned from.

For both of these apparently opposing ideologies—that of chronoscopic time, in which there can be no process, only the paralyzing and

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eternal instant of exposure; and that of a stable or purely teleological narrative history—photographs are the perfect vehicles. Presented in the classic magazine photo-story that is part of the American post-war and neoliberal visual landscape, photography is extraordinarily good at simplifying historical narratives.³⁸ At the same time, there is the overwhelming and disordered accumulation of individual frozen snapshots, that hold forever the falling towers or scattered witnesses running for their lives. In this collective visual mass, as in the extended stillness of Joel Meyerowitz's hallowed crime scene, time erupts, breaks the surface, and becomes space: the eternal, over-exposed Zero.

Conclusion

The pain of September 11, that isolated, exceptional, unprecedented point in history, seemed to make way for a glorious new mission: a war with a whole new set of rules, justification not only for a new ruthlessness in rooting out and punishing anyone who might pose a threat, but in the suspension of rights in the American Homeland: rights to privacy, free speech and, most significantly, the right to freedom from fear. The climate of fear that was cultivated by the American administration and that kept the public in a manipulable state of anxious support for the "War on Terror" has been commented on widely. But while it was extraordinary and in many ways unique, September 11, 2001, was not, of course, Year Zero, or Day Zero. The discontinuous irruption that Virilio describes—the chronoscopic funneling of all time into an instant that can only lead to obsessive fixation—is thus the description of an ideological apparatus. As well as being a senseless and indefensible act to which no logic can be applied, it was also a convergence of traceable histories: complex international political and diplomatic issues; globalization and anti-globalization movements; the diversification and misconceptions of Islam, and others. America was part of a fragile world order long before there was a color-coded warning system by which to measure its fragility on a given day.³⁹ September 11 provoked a sense of unprecedentedness on the one hand, but also, for some, of culmination, and this confusion prevails. And since that day, commentators from both inside and outside the United States have expressed grave concerns about breaches of human rights and civil liberties that have taken place under the auspices of its new war.

The role of Benjamin's allegorical angel is to learn: he is history reflexively re-examining itself. But the angel is powerless and so the lessons he

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learns are ultimately painful. He has given up searching in the rubble for any trace of meaning and is resigned to standing still. For Benjamin, writing in despair and exile near the end of his own life, this is still a worthwhile pursuit. But in twenty-first century American public discourse there is still, almost two decades on, little room for existential nihilism or ideological doubt. These cannot be tolerated, and for many, looking to the past with a critical rather than a nostalgic eye is not an option. Faced with Meyerowitz's photographs, we may look on in grief, but we are not positioned as helpless onlookers.⁴⁰ There is wreckage and catastrophe, but there is no paralysis here. We are invited by the image instead to identify with the heroic protagonists, woven into their redemptive narrative, reassured that the story will move forward from this moment toward a better one. From Day Zero, the point at which the lines of history are re-drawn, the only value to be gained from looking back is in finding patterns that confirm what we want to see in the present. The attack on the twin towers is fixed within a great unfolding story of which we already know the ending because good triumphs over evil, inevitably and always.

As the years have gone by, the various photographs discussed here, and many others, have moved back and forth through the signifying chains of discourse and memory-work, dynamic carriers of meaning that continues to shift and change. But their collective status as the definitive record of public memory only intensifies. As with all terrible events, the further it recedes into history, the greater the weight of memory becomes. Each image is required to transport us over a greater distance, show more, reveal more, explain more. The passage of time allows for more critical detachment in how we talk about them, but it also makes them more sacred, as pieces of the past that gradually become more vivid than our own memories.

NOTES

1. This essay features material originally published in *Photography and September 11th: Spectacle, Memory, Trauma* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), reproduced with permission from Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

2. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1985), 257.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Peter Wollen, "Vectors of Melancholy," in Ralph Rugoff (ed.), *Scene of the Crime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 25.

5. For a discussion of the concept of "bearing witness" within the context of photojournalism and documentary photography, including the ways in which it is predicated on a language of legal and forensic process, see Jennifer Good and Paul Lowe, *Understanding Photojournalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 147–158; 160.

6. "Mission Statement," 9/11 Memorial Museum, accessed June 28, 2019, <https://www.911memorial.org/mission-statement>.

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7. David Company, "Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on the Problems of 'Late Photography,'" in Ralph Rugoff, *Where Is the Photograph?* (London: Photoworks, 1999), 124.
8. Liam Kennedy, "Remembering September 11: Photography as Cultural Diplomacy," *International Affairs* 79 (2): 315–326 (2003), 320.
9. Phaidon's promotional web page.
10. Each cited in Terry Smith, *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 146.
11. Company, "Safety in Numbness," 132.
12. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, *After September 11: Images from Ground Zero: An Exhibition by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, with Photographs by Joel Meyerowitz* (exhibition catalogue, 2004).
13. *Ibid.*, 15.
14. *Ibid.*, 3.
15. Joel Meyerowitz, *Aftermath: World Trade Centre Archive* (New York: Phaidon, 2006), 5.
16. *Ibid.*
17. In his own words, "I will be the Mathew Brady," in Vince Aletti, "Site Specific: With Joel Meyerowitz in the Forbidden City," *Village Voice* (November 2, 2001), 13.
18. John Carman, "Mesmerizing Scenes of Hell," *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 12, 2001), A1.
19. Alan Trachtenberg, "Albums of War: On Reading Civil War Photographs," in *The New American Studies: Essays From Representations*, edited by Philip Fisher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 287.
20. Meyerowitz, *Aftermath*, 52.
21. See David Osborne, "Americans Find Echoes of Patriotic Grit in a Defining Image from Ground Zero," *Independent.co.uk* (22 October 2001). <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/americans-find-echoes-of-patriotic-grit-in-a-defining-image-from-ground-zero-9169610.html>.
22. Friend, *Watching the World Change*, 62.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 28.
25. David Friend, *Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11* (New York: Picador, 2006), 34.
26. *Ibid.*
27. See Jennifer Good, *Photography and September 11th: Spectacle, Memory, Trauma* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
28. *Ibid.*, 47–68; 113–138.
29. Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (London: Verso, 1997).
30. *Ibid.*, 3.
31. *Ibid.*, 27.
32. *Ibid.*, 29.
33. *Ibid.*, 40.
34. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
35. *Ibid.*, 175.
36. Here I connect Benjamin's piling of wreckage, Virilio's compression of instants and Herman's pile of snapshots only inasmuch as they are metaphors that are suggestive of one another. They in fact each refer to very different concepts that are not to be confused with each other, but which do point toward a confusion, and this is essentially my argument.
37. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 247.
38. American staples of this genre, *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*, as well as many of the regional newspapers' weekend magazine supplements, each produced commemorative

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photo-based special editions in the wake of 9/11, and some even produced photo-books (more than one, in the case of *Life*).

39. I refer here to the color-coded U.S. Homeland Security Advisory System, introduced in 2002 following the 2001 terror attacks and updated daily in accordance with intelligence information to advise the public of the current level of terrorist threat. See David Kravets, 2009, "Color-Coded Threat Level Advisory Under Attack," September 16, 2009. *Wired.co.uk*, <https://www.wired.com/2009/09/threatleveladvisory/>.

40. This "we" is the collective viewer constructed, implied and addressed by the image in a gesture of ideological force. It is not intended as a generalization that sublimates the actual diversity of viewers and perspectives, including those who are either excluded by, or choose to reject, the dominant discourse represented by it (This in contrast to the use of "we" by Colin Powell in his speech cited above, note 13).

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